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Gossip Has It! An In-Depth Investigation of Malaysian Employees on Gossip Activities at Workplace

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Abstract

This qualitative study aims at understanding the reasons for conception of gossiping phenomenon among private and public sector employees in Malaysia. Data for this research was gathered through in-depth interviews, which involved 15 informants that had been chosen through purposive sampling, aided by criterion-based selection and being conducted through theoretical sampling. In terms of gossip conception, data from informants have contributed to 8 themes that have been divided into two categories - pertain to content and pertain to functions. From these categories, the researchers conclude that gossip continues to be a firm feature of social and organisational landscapes, whereby without these social activities, interpersonal communication that harnesses the organisational communication would not be able to develop.

Key words: Gossip; Workplace; Gossip context and functions; Gossip content; People; Organisational communication; Organisational behaviour

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INTRODUCTION

A challenge facing nearly every organisation in a crisis is the circulation of gossips in which, unaddressed, can cause significant reputational harm and sometimes even more

harm than the crisis. Gossips are particularly challenging because it is hard to figure out when a gossip started, how it is building momentum and when it might end. Once started, gossips can spread among employees, customers, suppliers, lenders, investors and regulators. Gossips can feed other gossips, and when they hit the media, they are formalised and seen as accurate rendering of reality. If the gossip is about malfeasance or inappropriate activity, it commands a high level of credibility. As noted in the best-selling book "A Civil Action", by Jonathan Harr, "It is the nature of disputes that a forceful accusation by an injured party often has more rhetorical power than a denial".

Shibutani (1966) noted that gossips arise from uncertainty, from the absence of context and concrete information by which those affected by a crisis may understand its significance. Shibutani (1966) elaborated that "When activity is interrupted for want of adequate information, frustrated people must piece together some kind of definition, and gossip is the collective transaction through which they try to fill this gap. Far from being pathological, gossip is part and parcel of the efforts of people to come to terms with the exigencies of life".

Research literature from pioneers of the field such as Allport and Postman (1947); Shibutani (1966); Rosnow and Fine (1976) till latter studies by DiFonzo and Bordia (2010) in the United States, have demonstrated in their various studies that gossips are not merely the result of faulty communication. In obscure situations, people often respond like pragmatic problem-solvers, amalgamating their intellectual resources – which include accurate data, guesses, beliefs, speculation in which constructing consensus from whatever sources that are available just to make sense of situation. It is believed that gossips are capable of transmitting news; build but also ruin reputations, set off riots and wars. Yet the advents of newspapers, the radio and most recently, the audiovisual explosion, have not smothered gossips. In spite of the media, the public continues to glean some of its

information from word of mouth. The arrival on the scene of mass media, instead of suppressing talk, has merely made it more specialised: each form of communication now has its own territory (Shibutani, 1966; Rosnow & Fine, 1976; DiFonzo and Bordia, 2010).

Where does the phenomenon known as “gossips” begin and where does it leave off? How does it differ from what is commonly called “word of mouth”? The concept in fact slips away when one believes one has pinned it down. Everyone thinks that they could recognise gossips when they come across them, but very few people have yet managed to provide a satisfactory definition of gossip. On the whole, whereas everyone feels quite certain that gossips exist, there is no consensus concerning the phenomenon’s precise delimitations. Therefore, this study aims to examine these issues at understanding the reasons for conception of gossiping phenomenon among private and public sector employees in Malaysia. The remainder of this paper is organised as follows. Section 2 presents the literature on the factors influencing the conception of gossips. The next section, Section 3 details the research design of the study. This is followed by Section 4 which presents the results of the analysis. The last section provides the discussion and conclusion.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1 Gossip Content and Functions Reliant

People comprehend or understand gossip whether experiencing it first hand or being the provider of information to create the gossip. The large amount of gossip and gossip normally devoted to a person or group of people that is not present in the discussion (Wielers, 1998; Sitzman, 2006). From the past research, gossip’s general definition normally refers to misinformation of stories being communicated on a public scope whereby people use this process to share facts and personal opinions. However, gossip has a reputation for not being accurate with modifications and additional information of initial subject matter.

Gossips are information conveyed to other people at the time of interpersonal contact. Interest and thirst for such information is widely spread. So it is not surprising that gossips are being embedded as characteristic features of all cultures and are spread in all layers of various societies. To tell the truth, cultural mentality of any nation, its customs and traditions have influence on the scale of spreading. According to Pruskus (2009), this phenomenon is distinguished by its universality because it extends to all social groups and professions and is generally caused by the cultural mentality. Different social groups and separate professions vary in receptivity of gossips but the influence of them is felt by everyone.

In addition, gossip in the workplace is on the whole characterised as positive or negative communication

within organisations. Some view gossip as a positive effect, as such giving individuals the ability to form social bonds between colleagues. However, some researchers such as Richards (2008); Smith (2011) and Tebbut (1997) disagree with the notion, as to him gossip causes negative “misbehaviour” effect on productivity and moral that consequently impacts the bottom line. It goes without saying, that the influence of a gossip itself diverse in nature. It can help some individuals, a group, an organisation or an institution to achieve a fixed aim in a very positive manner, but on the other hand can also cause harm. From this perspective, it is likely to view gossip as means of fighting for achieving one’s interests because various concerned groups, organisations, political parties and other institutions are inclined to make use of it. Hence, it is likely to authenticate that a gossip has got an influential (tool) purpose fulfilling some social functions. Sometimes it becomes an effective means of control in social groups and social behaviour of their members, and also the support of a group’s identity and stability (Pruskus, 2009, pp.1-2).

In pursuit of accomplishing the understanding on the nature of gossip in the workplace, the researchers set out to look at existing literature dated from 1947 till 2011. Much of the literary works come from the West, mainly the United States. Unfortunately, materials in regards to gossip in the Malaysian organisational context were relatively scarce. However, it is a hopeful sign that within the last few years there has been a small resurgence (Bordia, 1996; DiFonzo & Bordia, 2010; Heath et al., 2001) in the area of general gossip research after a long decline. Until now there has been a distinct debunking tone taken by those who have ventured into the field after the early 1970’s (Best, 1990; Glassner, 1999; Fine & Turner, 2001), of which have implicitly regards the academic audience itself as potentially credulous.

What is notable is this tone’s contrast with that of the mid-century research cited above, where the implied audience is assumed to be sceptical and is addressed as a potentially gossip-defusing, opinion-leading public. The researchers do not think the contemporary tone is a mistake but to the extent of guessing that it is based on these authors’ frustrating experiences in discussing their work with colleagues whose profession is supposed to make them less gullible. Having engaged in similar debunking activities, the researchers began to think, quite simply, about how people made decisions about what they believed and what they did not.

It is ironic that gossip researchers in social science declined precisely in the West when popular interest in urban legend increased, and when a genre-transforming channel such as the Internet has become widely accessible. Compared to the enthusiasm of the academy for the subject in the mid-20th century, interest in the study of gossips has dramatically withering. Knopf

(1975, p. 11) suggests that the difficulty in documenting gossip and related genres has likely discouraged social science research. It may also be that this decline stemmed from a paralysis that is methodologically driven: the impact of gossip is not easily 'measured' and 'analysed'. Gossip studies thus fit poorly into social sciences' self-imposed intellectually deformities these days. Yet, ironically quantitative approaches among the United States researchers also have lagged (Fine, 1994, p. 144; Donovan, 2007; p. 60). This fact may be more than the result of loss of interest and one could measure the prevalence of certain gossips, as researchers in France have done (Kapferer, 1989), but it is not always clear what insights could be gleaned from the results, as conceptually speaking we do not know what proportion of the public (general or community-specific) would need to have heard or passed along a given gossip for it to be considered socially meaningful.

Since gossip circulate largely through informal means such as grapevine and gossip is widely, cyclically and anonymous, their meaning cannot be exclusively linked to specific local strains and anxieties, nor can it be said that groups within society develop and promulgate legends independently. Documentation of nearly every gossip abounds with examples of the way in which the same gossip is adapted for diverse audiences, not only in the West but also in some cases globally. Recent analysis of specific gossips, usually in the form of organisational gossips, tends to be limited to one or two approaches: either a narrative analysis focusing on the content of gossip, or an analysis of the importance of the gossip to a specific group.

The involvement of mid-century gossip researchers in the related practice of 'gossip control and management' also reflects an era of striking epistemological confidence and cultural authority that itself had broken apart by the 1960s. Indeed Neubauer (1999, p. 6) associated the whole notion of gossip management with the need 'to defend the dwindling social centre from the increasing growth of the periphery'. Perhaps this is why critical scrutiny of gossip may be met with some academic reticence. In the United States particularly, academics may see themselves as aligned with the periphery and thus may hope for gossip as a kind of holdout, or organic anti-system moment. But empirically speaking, it is an error to associate gossip with this kind of resistance, as there are plenty of gossips in the centre, among elites, and many popular ones are even frankly retrograde. Yet social scientists have been entirely too preoccupied with debunking gossips themselves. While debunking is often necessary, especially with those gossips that sustain fear and hatred, this stance has tended to cause researchers to address themselves exclusively to be credulous and explain to them that they should know better. There is a need to return to a more general level of inquiry about gossip.

1.2 Gossip as a Channel of Dissemination

How do gossips being communicated in organisations? From extensive studies conducted by De Becker (2005); Shermer (2004); Westacott (2000), and Michelson and Mouly (2004), gossips usually being communicated through idle talk. Gossip is sometimes described as a casual or idle talk, often between friends and colleagues. Similar to gossip, the term is frequently used with negative connotations, referring to spreading of malicious information, unreliable source, unchecked anecdotes and misinformation. The other negative views of gossip are its nature of being trivial, invasive, and commonly harmful (Crnkovic & Anokhina, 2010, p.12). Several researchers however suggested neutralising and generalising the concept of gossip is by referring it to "any talk about other people" (Westacott, 2000; De Becker, 2005). Even (Kurland & Pelled, 2000) define gossip as an informal and evaluative talk about a person who is not present, which also offers a neutral definition and suggests the common nature of gossip. In this matter, the aim for this neutralisation of the term is to be able to identify in which cases of the talk about people may become problematic.

Gossip seems to be a well known phenomenon in all societies, both historical and contemporary ones (Crnkovic & Anokhina, 2010, p.12). It seems to fulfil certain psychological and social functions such as decreasing uncertainty and increasing social cohesion through shared sensitive information. In the case of neutral talk about other people, it is evident that information of all about everybody else may be beneficial for a group of people.

Crnkovic and Anokhina (2010) claimed that employees gossip to gain information, influence others, and to socialise. Gossip is seen as a communication process of unauthenticated information through sense making function in understanding ambiguous situation. Gossip activities would increase in situations of environmental ambiguity (Rosnow, 2001) where employees have low impact on decision-making, and when policies and information may not be clear. Under such circumstances, gossip may decrease the feeling of uncertainty. However, gossip also should be seen to have the opposite effect as well in increasing the uncertainty and the anxiety level in organisation. Thus, gossip is commonly assumed to be a waste of time, especially in high productivity environment. In a different light, Michelson and Mouly (2004) viewed gossip as a tool of information exchange that helps employees to socialise, strengthen social bonds, foster intimacy and preserve group solidarity. This notion also being supported by Collins (1994) that revaluation of the received view of gossip in order to balance the image of gossip as entirely malicious, pointless, trivial and inappropriate activity. Gossip enhances people's capacity to project themselves into new circumstances and learn about others, share their evaluations and increase self-understanding.

1.3 Gossip as Organisational Communication

There is widespread agreement that gossip largely overlooked organisational phenomenon despite being accepted as a pervasive and inevitable fact of organisational life (Hafen, 2001; Michelson & Mouly, 2002). In particular, there is scant research on organisational member's experiences of gossip, their interpretations of these experiences, and how they construct these interpretations. A study by Mills (2010) have made some contribution to the literature by addressing these three aspects of succession-related gossip and, in doing so, suggests the foundation of a theory of embedded organisational communication.

Mills (2010) suggests that internal stakeholders in an organisation experience gossip as a highly contingent conversational exchange process where the focus, process, and intentionality vary with the situation, especially in terms of the phases of a CEO succession. Hafen (2004) suggests the data on gossip needs to be geo-social contexts that prevail during the period of data collection. To indiscriminately aggregate data on organisational gossip would mean ignoring its highly idiosyncratic and situated nature.

Not only do the findings suggest data on gossip needs to be seen as situated in the context in which it is created, they suggest that the gossip itself is situated or in other words embedded, in other forms of both formal and informal communication. According to them, no evidence was found of gossip occurring in isolation from other forms of communication. These findings challenge two traditions within the literature. First, they challenge the appropriateness of distinguishing between formal and informal types of communication such as gossip and assuming that one form can be studied and understood in isolation to the other. Second, the findings also challenge the tradition of endeavouring to distinguish gossip from gossip and other forms of informal communication. They suggested that both of these bifurcations in the researcher's approach to organisational communication are at odds with the real world experience of gossip and gossip spread.

However, study by Mills (2010) illustrated how the formal events within an organisation provide platforms for gossip if appropriate people are present, for instance, familiar and trusted co-workers. It seems that work-related activities bring people together and, in doing so, provide the opportunities for conversations in which gossip can be shared (Mills, 2010, p. 234). Informal events and casual encounters, similarly, provide opportunities for gossip. Gossip seems to occur within the context of conversations as a consequence of the "people" nature of organisational life. The topics that provide the emphasis for formal and informal conversations cannot be separated from the personal stories of those associated with these topics. Mills (2010) findings suggest that people will introduce these

stories into the conversational exchange process for a variety of reasons and often without consciously having a sense that they are gossiping, except perhaps in retrospect. For instance, sometimes such gossiping was coupled to formal communication as part of organisational members' attempt to make sense of this formal communication.

Whether gossip was integrated into either a formal or informal conversation, how this was done appeared to be tied to the perceived characteristics of the others who participated in the conversation. Sensitive or negative gossip was only reportedly shared when there was sufficient familiarity and trust between parties to ensure the likelihood of negative outcomes for the persona sharing the personal information was small (Mills, 2010; Ferrin et al., 2007). This is not surprising given that trust is recognised as one of the most important considerations in personal and group behaviour (Ferrin, et al., 2007). What this suggests is that gossip needs to be understood within the contexts of the quality of the relationships of those engaging in gossip activity and its implications for the maintenance of these relationships.

The findings from the literature have suggested few implications for researchers who have continued to pay little attention to how formal and informal types of communication interact. The findings by Mills (2010); Ferrin et al., (2007) suggested that, from a sense-making perspective, gossip should be viewed as an integral part of making sense of organisational life rather than potentially dangerous, inappropriate, or merely compensating for lack of formally provided information. From a relational perspective, the findings suggested that gossip, particularly sensitive and negative gossip, should be viewed as contributing to and providing a measure of relationship quality (Turner et al., 2003). From an organisational change perspective, Mills (2010) suggested that the way gossip apparently changes in focus, process and purpose across an organisational change could allow the progress of an organisational change to be monitored and strategised.

As for the manager, Mills (2010) and Hafen (2004) agreed that gossip should not be condemned, controlled, or eliminated but appreciated as a social process that needs to be understood and strategised in the same way as other legitimate organisational process. The challenge for the researcher is to find ways to be aware of the gossip so that its nature and consequences can be assessed. Such awareness implies that managers should seek to be connected to the conversations that occur in the workplace. How this connectedness is achieved, however, would be very dependent on the size of an organisation and the level of engagement with other organisational members that a manager is prepared of able to sustain.

Besides highlighting the surrounding of gossip, the study by Mills (2010) also challenged the appropriateness of the grapevine metaphor as a means of conceptualising

the way gossip operates within a multisite organisation. This metaphor embodies the notions of interconnection, directionality, and information flow. In the modern multisite organisation that being studied by Mills (2010) and Turner et al., (2003) has offered all the latest electronic means of communication, much that could be classified as gossip was confined to local interactions and therefore geographically isolated, suggesting that lean mediated forms of communication such as Internet, e-mail and fax do not take place of face-to-face communication when it comes to engaging in gossiping.

Given the strongly face-to-face character of much organisational gossip, a conversational exchange perspective rather than an information dissemination perspective seems more suited to the study of gossip (Guerin & Miyazaki, 2006). Such an approach would encourage the non-informational purposes of gossip, particularly the social ones proposed by scholars such as Rosnow (2001) and Hafen (2004), to be given greater prominence. Such a perspective is consistent with the findings here, which suggest that gossip is not necessarily experienced as an end in itself but rather fulfils other communication related agendas, for instance, having something to talk about and maintaining relationships in conversational setting.

Overall, Mills (2010) concluded her study that the way participants reported their experience gossip during the CEO succession process in their organisation did support the new theory of gossip that locates gossip as a type of communication that is coupled to or embedded in other communication forms, both informal and formal, and that has a conversational character that is shaped by the characteristics of the geo-social and task-related contexts in which participants engage with each other. This conversational character distinguishes its role and operation from some of the other forms of communication (Guerin & Miyazaki, 2006) with which it is associated.

1.4 The Functions of Gossip in Organisation

Both the social and individual utilities of gossip have been the subject of gossip studies by researchers from range of disciplines. For example anthropologists have historically considered gossip as a tool to maintain groups' interests (Gluckman, 1963; Haviland, 1977) whereas psychologists have tended to consider the use of gossip to advance individual interests (Dunbar, 1996). Management researchers concerned with contemporary business groups are pressured to balance these levels of interest and they continue to question whether gossip enhances or damages an organisation's performance (Morris, 2001).

The wide variation in opinion and action concerning gossip reflects more than traditional, discipline-specific biases of methodological collectivism, which is common to anthropology, and methodological individualism, which is common to psychology. First, the word "gossip" is often used to communicate many alternative meanings.

Second, there are few empirical studies of gossip in contemporary organisations (Noon & Delbridge, 1993). Since empirical studies require operationalised subjects, the Kniffin and Wilson (2005) define gossip to include positive and negative talk about commonly associated people. They also did not distinguish whether such talk is done covertly or overtly with regards to the gossip's target. Given these conditions, Kniffin and Wilson (2005) accepted a modified version of Kurland and Pelled's (2000, p. 429) definition of gossip as "informal and evaluative talk in an organisation, usually among no more than a few individuals, about another member of that organisation" that is or is not present.

In the study by Kniffin and Wilson (2005), the model of gossip that they have tested through their case study was pluralist, multilevel, and evolutionary. Rather than assuming that gossip is a function of either individual or group-level interests, they recognise that gossip can be "group-serving," "self-serving," or some combination thereof, depending on the context (Wilson et al., 2000). Kniffin and Wilson (2005) agreed with Noon and Delbridge's conclusion that "the multiple motivations and functions of gossip take place at both the individual and group level, so analysis should not ignore this" (1993, p. 29).

Given the recognition that gossip can impact multiple levels of organisation, and given that the intensity and direction of gossip can change across space and time, Kniffin and Wilson (2005) have considered it useful to employ the evolutionary framework of multilevel selection theory (Sober & Wilson, 1998; Wilson, 2002). Evolutionary biologists increasingly apply multilevel selection theory when considering interaction across organisational levels in a range of non-human species. For human organisations, multilevel selection theory has been successfully employed through a variety of archival analyses (Boehm, 1993, 1996, 1997, 1999; Richerson & Boyd, 1999; Wilson, 2002), simulation models (Boyd et al., 2003; Bowles & Gintis, 2004; Wilson & Kniffin, 1999), and experiments (Fehr et al., 2002).

Multilevel selection theory recognises that interests can overlap across levels. For example, group-serving behaviour does not need to come at the expense of individual interests. The framework provided by multilevel selection theory avoids the focus on individual interests common to arguments that "costly signalling". Smith (2004) explains cooperation within groups. Multilevel selection theory's pluralism promotes flexibility that recognises that traits such as selfishness can occur in different contexts at levels including those of genes, individuals, and groups.

Gossip has traditionally not been the subject of a multilevel evolutionary analysis that hypothesises different utilities of gossip for individuals and groups. Wilson and colleagues (2000), however, designed and administered hypothetical paper-and-pencil tests of reactions to self-serving and group-serving gossip. In samples of

undergraduates in the North Eastern United States, they presented subjects with a series of hypothetical vignettes that varied the interests of the fictional gossip. Wilson et al. (2000) found a consistent pattern of approval for group-serving gossip and disapproval for self-serving gossip. In one set of varied scenarios, respondents found no fault with gossip exposing cheaters on a test, while gossip that derogated fellow classmates (for example, competitors) drew harsh reactions.

More commonly, gossip has been descriptively reported in ethnographic accounts Acheson (1988) explained by evolutionists primarily for its individual benefits or recognised as a topic that is resistant to systematic inquiry (Noon, 2001). Among anthropologists, Gluckman's (1963) view of gossip as a tool of social control has been adopted widely though not uniformly (Pain, 1967). In more contemporary and compartmentalised environments, gossip has been acknowledged for playing a role in the social management of ranching lands (Ellickson, 1991), lobster fisheries (Acheson, 1988), a garment factory (Hamilton et al., 2003), and airline performance (Knez and Simester, 2001). In each of these cases, gossip has been recognised as an important line of defence against violations of group-beneficial norms.

In larger industrial settings that are less traditionally studied by anthropologists, Knez and Simester (2001) and Hamilton et al. (2003) found that firms can benefit from the creation of structures that encourage "mutual monitoring," a state where members of a given unit take greater responsibility for the actions of others in their unit and a prerequisite condition for gossiping (Campbell, 1994). In their study of the effects of an incentive scheme that rewarded airport-specific units of ground staff as independent groups, Knez and Simester (2001) found that the introduction of team-based incentives to pre-existing units increased performance as measured by the timeliness of airline flights. In a different context, Hamilton et al. (2003) found that the creation of work teams and the institution of team-based incentive structures led to an increase in the factory's overall garment production.

In each of the cases described above, studies were conducted within communities of familiars with common goals or rewards in mind. Though group sizes were not consistently reported, it is reasonable to assume that the groups sharing common incentives were small enough to allow for meaningful interpersonal relationships (Dunbar, 1993; Hill & Dunbar, 2003). By taking advantage of the "mutual monitoring" that is available to members of relatively small groups, organisations appear to have benefited from "recreating the kinds of social environments in which we work best" (Dunbar, 1996, p. 207) across generations of social evolution or more novel, managerial plans.

The field studies described above are also consistent with the results of mathematical models (Enquist & Leimar, 1993) and laboratory experiments (Ostrom et

al., 1994). In their model, Enquist and Leimar (1993) presuppose that mobility confers opportunities to engage in serial cheating among competitors while finding that "gossiping counteracts free riding by allowing information (that a particular individual is unreliable and should not be interacted with) to spread through a group" (1993, p.751). As reviewed by Dunbar (1999), reported that laboratory experiments showing that face-to-face communication - particularly when such communication is allowed to include the punishment of defectors typically increases the probability that stranger would cooperate in public goods dilemmas.

In a relatively rare quantitative study of real-world gossip, Dunbar et al. (1997) report the results of systematic eavesdropping on strangers in trains, cafeterias, and bars. Dunbar and colleagues found that "only about 3-4% of conversation time centres around 'malicious' (or negative) gossip in the colloquial sense" (1997, p. 242). Although Dunbar et al. (1997) employ useful quantitative sampling methods to reach their conclusions, it is important to observe that their samples do not account for the nature of any relationships that might have existed among the conversants. Their samples also do not account for conversations held away from open, public spaces that are ripe for eavesdropping (Emler, 2001). This lack of a naturalistic context contrasts with the ethnographic backgrounds provided by Ellickson (1991), Acheson (1988), Knez and Simester (2001), and Hamilton et al. (2003).

More than simply knowing more contexts for the individuals studied by Ellickson (1991), Acheson (1988), Knez and Simester (2001), and Hamilton et al. (2003) than the researcher does for studies involving listening to strangers, the researcher know that each of their studies involved groups dealing with social or collective problems. In an evolutionary context, we know that members of each of these groups shared common fates with one another. The researcher knew further that each case entailed a fitness or reward structure that benefited responsible group-level production. In contrast, the people observed by Dunbar et al. (1997), who were unfamiliar to the researchers, do not necessarily share common fates, nor do they necessarily monitor mutual, consequential interests. One can infer from the researcher's synthesis of these earlier studies that the likelihood of gossip emerging in a given environment is partly a function of the interdependence of an organisation's members and partly a function of the presence of conflict within or facing an organisation.

2. RESEARCH DESIGN

2.1 Sampling Procedure

This study employs purposive sampling, aided by criterion-based selection and conducting it through theoretical sampling. In purposive sampling, a specific

sample was chosen intentionally because it contains several aspects that have allowed the researcher to obtain as much detailed information, and a deep understanding of the thesis and research hypothesis. Sampling was carried out with considerations of two principles, which are: 1) all samples are able to provide answers to item serving as the research objective, and 2) at the same time, the sampling must take into consideration the factor of diversity existing in each sample hoping that it will produce various effects to the data to be obtained (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003).

This study analyses the data from one informant and look for new themes that emerged based on the objectives of the study. Once this had been done, the researchers shall move to the next informant and replicate the same process until no new themes shall emerge. When this happens, therefore, the data has reached to its point of saturation.

2.2 Informant's Selection Procedure

Research informants were also selected using purposive sampling but under the maximum variation type and through the process of theoretical sampling as explained earlier. The informants were chosen because they have particular features or characteristics (criterion-based selection), which have enabled detailed exploration of the research objectives. The characteristic of the informants should meet the criterion as stated include have to be the youngest being 24 and the eldest of 58 years and regardless of gender, multi-cultural diversity and socio-economic status, should be working in any governmental agencies or corporate organisations, willing and voluntarily participates in this research and at least hold an executive level post with minimum of two (2) years of working experience.

2.3 Researcher as an Instrument

In order to ensure first hand meaningful and rich data, the researchers are required to feel and experience the informants' thoughts and feelings by interviewing them. The best way to this was the researchers had to become the instrument and involved in the process of data collection from the start until the end of the field work activities. According to Morse and Richards (2002), the role of researchers as a research instrument is meant to create data over events that are related to the research problems and topics. They mentioned that data is not strewn over a location like apples on the ground, ready to be picked. In fact, data is found in a person, or events or items that are the centre of someone's research.

This study utilises in-depth interview as a technique of collecting data in this study, the researcher acted as an interviewer and initiated the atmosphere for the informants to be stimulated and open in participating interactively, and at the same time tried to include each participant in a balanced discussion, and constantly guide informants in refraining themselves to touch on issues that are not related to the interview topic (Finch & Lewis, 2003). The role of

instrument during the interview session is depending on the dynamism and the chemistry between the informant and the instrument based on the roots of the research question being discussed as participants' interests and attention heavily influence by these factors. At this moment, the researcher experienced that there were some participants who were not keen to share. When this situation occur, the instrument had to play his role to ensure the discussion stays "alive" and fresh by asking questions, probing questions and debating on other issues that may attract the interests of the informant to continue talking.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The main concern of this study is at understanding the reasons for conception of gossiping phenomenon among private and public sector employees in Malaysia. Therefore, in understanding the gossiping phenomenon at workplace, the focus on the contexts in which how gossips are being conceived, the contexts of gossips and what the functions of gossips are on the group that it serves are investigated in detail.

Gossip is evaluative social talk about individuals, usually not present, which arises in the context of social network formation, change, and maintenance – that is, in the context of building group solidarity. According to Bordia and DiFonzo (2007), gossip fulfils a variety of essential social network functions including entertainment, maintaining group cohesiveness, and establishing, changing, and maintaining group norms, group power structure and group membership.

According to Smith et al. (1999), gossip arises in the context of social network formation, change and maintenance, that is, in situations concerned with building group solidarity. One core human motivation is to belong, to fit in and be part of a group (Fiske, 2004). Gossip is talk that helps people do that by informing persons about the group and individuals within it, helping one to keep track of people's in one's social network, advertising oneself as a potential friend or mate, influencing people to conform to group norms, and providing mutual enjoyment of an entertaining snack together (Dunbar, 2004; Foster & Rosnow, 2006; Rosnow & Georgoudi, 1985). Like primate grooming, activity that promotes interpersonal bonding is essential to group cohesion; thus, gossip is a very important activity in any workplace as without it, societies at the workplace would not be sustainable (Dunbar, 1996, p. 21).

3.1 Gossip as Social Networking

Gossip performs several functions that are key to social network formation and maintenance (Foster, 2004). Gossip first of all provides information about complex social environments; it informs people about aspects of the group (Levin & Arluke, 1987). This phenomenon can be seen in the episodes below by the following informants:

“Like my boss... she never tell me directly... but she would post it on facebook or talk about it with other people... I don't know what's wrong with her, my boss just don't like me wearing glamorous outfit. She told people that I am quite elderly and should dress like an elderly... Does she feel threatened by me?”
 (Informant 2, Line 1164-1168)

“I've been working here for almost 10 years, from my observation the most of the Malays here they like to dig on other people's dirt”.
 (Informant 15, Line 10847-10849)

“Accounts Receivable Unit and my department don't play well together. The manager has some personal issue with me but somehow she cannot keep it professionally. It's quite difficult for my staff to do their job if the AR keep looking for faults”
 (Informant 4, Line 2599-2603)

Thus, from the episodes above, we could see that gossip is all about information gained by social comparison with other people. In most general terms, gossip has been proposed as information gained through observing the “adventures and misadventures of others”; gossip thus provides cultural information in a second (and then third and fourth and fifth) hand fashion (Baumeister et al., 2004, p. 112).

3.2 Building Group Solidarity by Social Entertainment

A second way that gossip builds group solidarity is by providing social entertainment (Litman and Pezzo, 2005; Rosnow and Fine, 1976). It could be said that gossip works as a mutual mood enhancer – together people laugh at other people's peccadilloes. They enjoy a bit of private information about someone else (Rosnow & Georgoudi, 1985); sharing such information helps to pass the time. Episodes from the informants below illustrate this function in detail:

“One day, my boss came to the office forgetting to button up her top and some part of her bosoms are being visible. Hehehe.... The funny thing was, all male colleagues here who would run away from her all in sudden being very diligent to update her on project status... After that ahhh... they would go out to the canteen and compare notes... Men!”
 (Informant 3, Line 1756-1762)

“There's one incident recently, my male colleague here being chased by someone's husband. He ran like there's no tomorrow... That incident has become the joke of the month. In any occasion people would just quote him out of nowhere for his sprinting skills. Serve him right for having an affair with somebody else's wife. There are a lot of single ladies in this building, but why a mother of three kids? Crazy!”
 (Informant 1, Line 303-309)

“Talking about mistakes... stories like this definitely can attract people's attention... example... like... urmm....My boss is one funny character...urmm... He would just agree to anything but then when problem arises, he would just deny it as though that any decision made does not go through him first. Because of that, he's being recognised as “Haji Maniam”. Why? He likes to twist and turn the facts as long as he's off the hook... because of that story he gets very famous....”
 (Informant 5, Line 4201-4207)

3.3 Intimacy Boundaries and Group Membership

Another primary function of gossip is to define intimacy boundaries and group membership; by gossiping with another person it would help members feel closer (Smith et al., 1999) or bonded (Hom & Haidt, 2002). It has been argued that gossip is an efficient means of social bonding, enabling friendship groups to include many members (Dunbar, 2004). One knows that he or she is part of the social group when someone whispers some delightful inside information; one at last becomes an insider. One does not gossip with one's enemies, but with colleagues or people which whom one wishes to be more strongly affiliated. Thus, through gossip people gain friendships and alliances. Of course, the darker side of delineating intimacy boundaries is exclusion: Through gossip, people ostracise (Smith et al., 1999). Thus gossip is evaluative talk behind someone's back (Foster, 2004; Sabini & Silver, 1982). It often evaluates the behaviour of a person or persons known to the participants – that is, in their social network – in a conversational context in which the “evaluative talk is about a person who is not present” (Eder & Enke, 1991, p.494). Gossip is a key weapon in “relational aggression” (Crick et al., 2001, p.210). These painful experiences of exclusion are often the most memorable aspects of childhood gossip experiences. Such finding is consistent with gossip's usefulness in excluding others in the finding that people sometimes feel remorse after spreading negative gossip (Hom & Haidt, 2002).

“I have a colleague in HR, we have this bonding where we talk about people and sometimes he spill one or two confidential information about persons that we talked about”
 (Informant 13, Line 9703-9706)

“Gossiping with colleagues who have mutual enemies with me can be very blissful. It is so nice to know that someone also have the same mutual feelings about our pompous boss”.

Researcher: “Do your boss know that you guys been gossiping about her/him?”

“No. We are very selective in with whom we're gossiping with. There's no point of gossiping if the other person knows that we're talking about him right?”
 (Informant 7, Line 5546-5553)

“I only gossip with friends that I trust the most. It's very difficult to trust people nowadays; especially those attention seekers who like to blurt gossips to others in order to be popular. This is the culture here.”
 (Informant 11, Line 8144-8148)

3.4 Who's In and Who's Out: Power Relationship in a Group

It has been observed that in any workplace environment that gossip defines not only who is in and out of the group, but also power relationships within a group. L.C. Smith et al. (1999) proposed that gossip preserves or enhances the gossiper's social status by slyly deprecating others or by enhancing self. Hom and Haidt (2002) factor analysed

items related to social “people talk” episodes: Gossiping made participants feel more empowered and popular, and that their status was elevated when telling critical gossip. The explanation above can be illustrated in the below episodes excerpts of discussions with the participants:

“In my department, this one particular guy is one whole lot of a character. He will go around and gossip and tell people stuffs. He is so popular if people wanted to know about anything, they just go and ask him. He’s like the walking CNN”.

(Informant 10, Line 7567-7570)

“I believe in any organisation that you’re working with... there must be a person who loves to talk about other people. Normally this type of people is very popular among colleagues because they love talking as well as making themselves very important in “disseminating” other peoples’ stories... if you want to know... people in production unit loves to do this kind of thing...”.

(Informant 3, Line 1776-1782)

“I have this one colleague who is very popular in the office for gossiping. She is very popular among the ‘keypoh’ people since she would be the one-stop resource centre to get information on people. Whenever she started a conversation, people would just gather around and listen to her attentively”.

(Informant 1, Line 377-382)

3.5 Propagate and Enforce Group Norms

Gossip also functions as to propagate and enforce group norms essential to group functioning. It means that gossip is somehow particularly useful in monitoring and cracking down on free riders – those who receive the benefits that colleagues gives without adequately returning in kind; too many free riders can severely limit group functioning and thus gossip performs an invaluable adaptive function (Dunbar, 2004, p.311). Gossip does this by “informally communicating value-laden information about members of a social setting” (Noon & Delbridge, 1993, p.24). Norms may be communicated by commenting personally known, such as celebrities (e.g. Fasha Sandha and Jejai) and political figures (*distal* gossip). Gossip thus has a moral orientation; it is value-laden. It forms, maintains, enforces, or disseminates group norms. In this way gossip influences and controls attitudes and actions (Rosnow & Georgoudi, 1985, p.212). In more broad terms, gossips educate people about how to act effectively in complex social environments (Foster, 2004), especially by specific comparisons with the behaviour of real or imagined others (Wert & Salovey, 2004). Therefore, in this research context we would be able to see how the gossipier enforces the group norms on how to react after the gossip has been disseminated. The below episodes would illustrate the examples.

“I don’t want to dwell into that... but then... when people make stories out of me... gossiping about me.... Their perception towards me also different... urm... changed... They see me differently after that...”

(Informant 6, Line 5144-5146)

“Knowing stories about your friends from other people makes our perception change about them. It’s not right for us to judge a person without hearing first from them. But then, it’s very

difficult sometimes to ignore whatever people say, because deep in our heart, it may be true. So somehow things might be different after that even though we tried to avoid changes in the way we treat the person after that”.

(Informant 7, Line 5649-5653)

“Urm... how eh to make things simple to tell you ya... urmm.. when we started to discuss about him with others who have experience working with him.... Errr.... Urmmm... It’s very difficult to maintain my or others perception about the person after we have gossip about him. Even though it’s probably not true, but somehow it does change my perception... even though it’s not much... but it does a little....”

(Informant 5, Line 4212-4217)

4. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This qualitative study aims at understanding the reasons for conception of gossiping phenomenon among private and public sector employees in Malaysia. This study collected data from informants have contributed to 8 themes that have been divided into two categories, namely pertain to content and pertain to functions. From these categories, the researchers conclude that gossip continues to be a firm feature of social and organisational landscapes, whereby without these social activities, interpersonal communication that harnesses the organisational communication would not be able to develop.

This study contributes from two perspectives point of view namely, theoretical and daily practices perspectives. In terms of the theoretical perspective, this study could be one of the most pioneer studies that attempt to understand the phenomenon of gossip at workplace in Malaysia. Besides proving the existence of the formation and dissemination activities through gossips, the study also discovers that the subject of gossip mongering activities could not be separated from the employees’ daily routine even though they are busy pursuing deadlines out of numerous task given to them in achieving organisational excellence.

Whatever model used in inculcating good governance towards achieving organisational goals with the presence of numerous official information channels to transmit vital organisational information from one party to other, however, informal communication i.e. grapevine communication emanated from gossip is equally important to the employees in accommodating their needs to discuss issues outside of their official duties. This phenomenon occurs across the boundaries of time, culture, and geographical constraints. This is due to the fact that similar occurrences have been found in many Western literature in the 1950s and 60s that involves employees either in Europe and United States of America. Thus, the theoretical contribution of this study is that the gossip activities in organisational setting are universal, without considering time, societal, culture and location constraints.

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